

## Title: Creating a Strategic and Flexible Assessment Framework for Undergraduate Student Outreach

**Abstract:** This chapter details how the Undergraduate Student Success team at the University of Washington's Odegaard Library designed new student-focused programming and created a program of outreach assessment to demonstrate value and impact. The chapter describes the outreach and assessment planning processes, the creation of a flexible outreach assessment toolkit, the qualitative and quantitative assessment methods employed, the results of our assessment program, and the best practices that emerged. This assessment project requires staff time and resources, ongoing project management, and several months of collection and analysis of data, but is highly replicable in a variety of institutional contexts.

**Keywords:** outreach, assessment, undergraduate students

**Project focus:** assessment methodologies, techniques, or practices; outreach

**Results made or will make case for:** more funding, improvements in services, proof of library impact and value

**Data needed:** n/a

**Methodology:** mixed method

**Project duration:** between 6 months and a year

**Tool(s) utilized:** staff; documentation on research protocols

**Cost estimate:** \$2,000–\$5,000

**Type of institution:** university—public

**Institution enrollment:** 30,000+

**Highest level of education:** doctoral



Chapter 29

# Creating a Strategic and Flexible Assessment Framework for Undergraduate Student Outreach

Section 3

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## Introduction

During the 2016–17 academic year, Odegaard Library’s newly created Undergraduate Student Success (USS) team at the University of Washington designed new student-focused programming in partnership with key undergraduate student-focused departments. As part of our outreach and collaboration with partners, the USS team created a robust program of assessment to demonstrate the value and impact of our work. This chapter describes the USS team’s outreach and assessment planning processes, the creation of the outreach assessment toolkit, the qualitative and quantitative assessment methods employed, the results of our assessment program, the lessons learned, and the best practices that emerged.

## Context

The University of Washington (UW) Libraries have long prioritized identifying user needs and assessing our efforts at meeting them. Over time, the UW Libraries' assessment program has assessed undergraduate student, graduate student, and faculty satisfaction with, and use of, the UW Libraries through its longitudinal surveys.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, the UW Libraries are using design thinking, qualitative research methods, and mixed-methods approaches to assess everything from library spaces to teaching and learning practices and user behavior.<sup>2</sup> It is within this context of strong institutional support for assessment that Odegaard Library's USS team sought to design a sustainable, intentional, and robust assessment framework for undergraduate student outreach.

Student success is a growing concern in undergraduate education. The term *student success* has multiple definitions and has many in higher education assessing how their institutions contribute to student success, ideally using multiple metrics for "success."<sup>3</sup> Academic libraries are increasingly participating in student success strategies, often working with partners in higher education to support learning communities, peer tutoring, and other methods for first-year, first-generation, transfer, and other undergraduate student populations.<sup>4</sup> Libraries are also designing approaches to assess and document the value of academic libraries and how they advance student success at their institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Locally, the University of Washington has prioritized attracting, retaining, and graduating a diverse undergraduate student body.<sup>6</sup> The *UW Diversity Blueprint* specifically prioritizes the goal of improving "retention and graduation rates for underrepresented undergraduate students to reach rates comparable to all UW undergraduate students."<sup>7</sup> There are several UW undergraduate-focused units making progress on these goals, including the Office of First Year Programs, the Undergraduate Research Program, and the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity, among others. In the context of our work in Odegaard Library, undergraduate student success is rooted in a commitment to diversity, equity, and student learning.<sup>8</sup>

Odegaard Library has long been committed to supporting undergraduate student learning and has aligned its services and spaces to serve undergraduate students broadly. The creation of the USS team at Odegaard Library provided us with the opportunity and the staffing needed to increase efforts on behalf of UW Libraries as a whole, to better serve key groups of undergraduate students: first-year and first-year transfer students, pre-major undergraduate international students, underrepresented minority students, and first-generation students. The USS team partners with Odegaard Library and UW Libraries staff and other campus units to develop responsive undergraduate student outreach. Prior studies at UW revealed that first-year undergraduate students, particularly international students and transfer students, experienced many challenges using our large library system, meeting subject librarians in their departments, feeling welcome in the library system, and connecting with library resources early in their academic careers.<sup>9</sup> The USS team is committed to designing memorable and meaningful experiences with the library, both social and academic, for these student groups. In this

era of rapid changes to higher education and undergraduate education, the USS team is well-positioned to partner with other campus units to support student success and retention.

## Outreach Assessment Framework

During the 2016–17 academic year, we embarked on an unprecedented number of new cosponsored outreach events as part of the fall 2016 first-year student orientation week Dawg Daze. This sparked the need to develop a pilot assessment program to measure the effectiveness of our outreach events and to demonstrate to stakeholders how the library provides value through outreach. The USS team's goals of creating strategic, sustainable, and scalable outreach programs also necessitated the development of an assessment framework that was flexible enough to be adapted to any size, format, or level of outreach. The timely publication of the article "Considering Outreach Assessment" gave the team the insight and inspiration needed to design our outreach assessment toolkit and overall framework in advance of our extensive fall quarter programming.<sup>10</sup>

Partnerships are key to successful student outreach and programming at the University of Washington. The USS team partnered with undergraduate student-focused units such as the Office of First Year Programs (FYP) and the Undergraduate Research Program (URP) and connected with the university's transfer student success initiative to develop new library outreach programming for transfer students. We also collaborated with longtime partner UW Information Technology's Learning Technologies unit, conveniently located in the Odegaard Library. The cosponsored outreach events, event goals, and desired student audiences are described in detail.

### ***Transfer Student Social with Departmental Librarians***

The Transfer Student Social provided transfer students an opportunity to socialize with fellow transfer students and to meet librarians and advisers for their intended majors before the start of fall quarter. The social was strategically scheduled immediately following the Undergraduate Research Program's popular Undergraduate Research for Community College Transfer Students Dawg Daze event. The goals and outcomes of the Transfer Student Social were to welcome transfer students to the UW Libraries and connect them with subject librarians for their intended majors. We wanted transfer students to know that the libraries has subject-specific resources and subject librarians who can help them.

### ***UW Libraries Tours for Transfer Students***

The UW Libraries Tours for Transfer Students event was marketed to undergraduate transfer students as an interactive tour of three unique libraries (Foster Business, Engineering, and the Research Commons), led by Transfer Student Ambassadors, who are returning transfer students. The library tours on the UW Seattle campus were designed to give transfer students a feel for the variety of spaces and resources available,

meet librarians and learn about the similarities and differences between the UW Libraries and community college libraries. The goals and outcomes of the tours were to encourage new transfer students to use different libraries on campus by making them feel welcome in, and familiarizing them with, libraries outside of the “main” Odegaard and Suzzallo and Allen Libraries.

### ***Kids’ Story Time***

The Kids’ Story Time event in Odegaard Library was marketed to undergraduate student parents, encouraging them to bring their kids to campus for a fun and informal event with story times, crafts, snacks, and time to find picture books they could check out from the UW Libraries’ children’s book collection. The goals and outcomes of the event were to create a welcoming, family-friendly library event for undergraduate student parents; promote the Libraries’ children’s book collection to undergraduate student parents; and reach undergraduate student parents to inform them of relevant Libraries services and resources.

### ***Dance Party***

The Dance Party event welcomed first-year students to the Odegaard Library in an innovative and engaging way. Odegaard Library was transformed into a late-night dance club complete with a DJ, dance floor, and professional lighting on the Saturday night before fall quarter classes began. The goals and outcomes of the Dance Party were to create a fun, welcoming, and positive library event for new undergraduate first-year students and to promote Odegaard Library as an academic and social resource for first-year students.

### ***Tech Expo***

The Tech Expo, organized by UW IT Learning Technologies, allows UW students to discover the free technology, discounts, and services available to them. The event, held in Odegaard Library, features booths from UW units and local technology companies such as Microsoft, Google, and Tableau. Students also had a chance to meet Odegaard Library staff and learn about the technology resources, services, and student perks available in the library. The goals of the Tech Expo were to provide awareness of the technology-related services and resources for undergraduate students and to provide a basic orientation to the Odegaard Library building, including service points and spaces.

## **Outreach Assessment Toolkit**

To meet our goal of creating strategic, sustainable, and scalable outreach programs, the USS team created an outreach assessment toolkit. The toolkit is a group of adaptable and flexible template documents that guide the assessment process. Grounded in a mixed-methods assessment approach, the toolkit can be used for any category or level

of outreach; from one-time “just for fun” events to annual instruction and services-focused programming. The toolkit template documents and examples are available online; search for “UW Libraries Outreach Assessment Toolkit.”

The following documents comprise the Outreach Assessment Toolkit: the outreach activity inventory, the assessment methods documents, the assessment organization spreadsheet, and the outreach report. The outreach activity inventory guides the assessment planning and execution process. In particular, this document aids in setting outcomes for the activity, choosing appropriate assessment methods based on the category of outreach and determined outcomes, setting expectations for staffing levels and resources needed to engage in assessment activities, and planning assessment communication with partners and stakeholders. The assessment methods documents guide staff in conducting assessment and are useful in taking into account differing levels of comfort and knowledge of assessment. The assessment organization spreadsheet lists the chosen assessment methods and corresponding duties for the staff members involved. For larger-scale assessment, this document is essential in keeping staff members organized. The outreach report template focuses on creating a narrative about the outreach activity, telling a story using assessment data, reporting the activity’s impact and value, and setting recommendations for future action. As the last document in the toolkit, the outreach report helps close the assessment loop, fosters communication between stakeholders, and aids in the planning process for similar or recurring outreach activities.

The toolkit was designed to consider flexibility and adaptability in the assessment process. Currently, the toolkit is housed in Google Drive, which allows for easy sharing, copying, and linking capabilities. Not only is this helpful in sharing parts of the whole toolkit with partners or colleagues, it also easily facilitates ongoing assessment of programs from year to year. Designed to meet the needs of a variety of institutions and teams, the toolkit can be expanded or simplified. The toolkit is a living document that grows and transforms as our program of assessment adapts to the team’s strategic directions and priorities.

The outreach assessment framework intentionally focuses on fostering and maintaining partnerships. In our institutional context, many of the team’s outreach activities require some sort of collaboration or partnership, either between library departments or with campus partners, in order to maximize impact and to keep workloads sustainable. This question of how to balance an outreach activity’s impact with staff effort, time, and resources required us to define impact. We defined impact to encompass the activity’s “reach,” including how many students attended and the level or quality of interaction between students and the library. We also consider the activity’s benefit to the partner and their student audience. Developing trust and fostering successful partnerships is ongoing work and is often invisible labor that we wanted to connect to the impact and value of outreach activities. The toolkit, and in particular the outreach report, serves as a vehicle for ongoing communication with partners. The conclusions drawn from assessment data and our recommendations reveal not only the impact of the outreach activity, but also the partnership dynamics and labor involved in the outreach activity.

## Communicating Results and Impact

The USS team is committed to demonstrating the value of libraries through the consistent and intentional assessment of our work and ongoing communication and collaboration with outreach partners. Rather than just a toolkit for assessing events, our assessment framework represents a new way of working for our team—it's a framework that is designed to inform partnerships and programming of all types. It's a framework that is designed to demonstrate the impact of our work and enables us, and our partners, to evaluate the ways in which we are (or are not) impacting the undergraduate student experience.

As part of our Dawg Daze outreach assessment pilot, assessment results and the demonstrated impact of each event were communicated through the toolkit outreach reports. Reports were shared with UW Libraries administration and with event stakeholders. The USS team then met with stakeholders to discuss the assessment results and recommendations in order to plan future Dawg Daze events. In collaboration with stakeholders, the USS team recommended to continue four of the five events. What follows is a summary of each of the Dawg Daze events' impact on and benefits to student populations and recommendations drawn from assessment data.

### ***Transfer Student Social with Departmental Librarians***

We used the methods of ethnographic observations and photo documentation, head counts, a post-event student survey, and staff reflection to assess the Transfer Student Social. This mixed-method approach was used to determine if the event would encourage students to contact a librarian and if students are more aware of library resources after this event. Based on our assessment data, the goals for the Transfer Student Social were met. Students were observed having conversations with other students, librarians, and advisers, sharing information, and learning about library resources and services. In addition, connecting with other people can help students build a sense of community and belonging on the UW's large campus. One student commented on the survey, "I appreciate all the on-campus transfer events. It truly feels welcoming and has helped prepare me for my classes." Scheduling the social in conjunction with URP's popular event (and co-listing the two events on the Dawg Daze schedule) is a model for other outreach events. This event was high-impact, characterized by personal and individualized interactions between librarians and transfer students and required moderate financial costs and low staff time and effort.

### ***UW Libraries Tours for Transfer Students***

Assessment of the Library Tours for Transfer Students included head counts, ethnographic observations and photo documentation, and staff reflection. Based on our assessment data, the goals for the Library Tours for Transfer Students events were met. The tours welcomed a large number of new transfer students to the branch libraries, and they learned from transfer student leaders and librarians targeted information about

Libraries spaces, services, and resources. The event was high-impact, with relatively low staff time and cost. The library tours were successful due to our partnership with FYP and the Transfer Student Ambassadors. Transfer students liked having a fellow transfer student welcome them to the Libraries, and this helped create a sense of transfer student community. We recommended holding these tours again for Dawg Daze 2017 and to continue partnering with FYP. Suggestions for improvement included creating opportunities for small-group discussion and question sessions and for librarians to attend the tour to help with wayfinding and answering in-depth questions.

### ***Kids' Story Time***

Assessment of the Kids' Story Time included head count, ethnographic observations and photo documentation, and staff reflection. Ultimately, we did not meet our key event goal of reaching undergraduate student parents to inform them of relevant Libraries services and resources. Given the low attendance and lack of undergraduate student attendees, the planning team's biggest questions about why the event was unsuccessful centered on appropriate timing, improved marketing, and partnering with the Student Parent Resource Center. While the participants who did attend found the event well planned and reported it being beneficial, the staff time and effort outweighed the potential positive impact of the event. We did not recommend this event be repeated for Dawg Daze 2017. We suggested that partnering with the Student Parent Resource Center and focusing on a different audience, such as graduate student parents, would be essential changes needed for a successful event.

### ***Dance Party***

Because it was our most ambitious event, we utilized multiple outreach assessment methods for the Dance Party: whiteboard comments, head counts, social media comments, ethnographic observations and photo documentation, and staff reflection. Over 2,000 students attended the event throughout the evening. Students were observed dancing, meeting new people, and making comments such as, "This is the Library?" and, "The Library is lit!" We concluded that the Dance Party was successful in promoting Odegaard Library as a fun, student-centered, and engaging space. During Dawg Daze, students are overwhelmed with information about the university, extracurricular activities, and college life. By hosting the Dance Party, Odegaard Library positioned itself to welcome students and show them that the library is not only here for their academic needs, but can also serve as a place in which they can belong, socialize, and find community.

The effort and skill of the planning team and First Year Programs were essential in executing a successful event. The staff time and effort needed to plan and execute the event was very extensive, but it was outweighed by the high impact and value provided to first-year undergraduate students. We recommended partnering with FYP to host the Dance Party again for Dawg Daze 2017 and recommended seeking continued funding from both FYP and the UW Libraries, obtaining additional staff participation across

Libraries branches and departments, and reviewing and refining assessment methods to take into consideration staff time and the relevancy of data collected.

## **Tech Expo**

To assess the Tech Expo, we used the following methods: head counts, staff reflection, ethnographic observations and photo documentation, and whiteboard comments. Based on the assessment data, we concluded that our goals were met for this event. Odegaard Library staff interacted with hundreds of students, spread awareness of technology-related services and resources, and students were oriented to the Odegaard Library building through a passport activity. Student feedback and comments also demonstrate a positive learning experience. The success of raising awareness and orienting students to the building was made possible by our partnership with UW-IT Learning Technologies. Because of their efforts, the Libraries was integrated into an already high-impact event and had the fantastic opportunity to interact with a broad range of new and returning students. We recommended that Odegaard Library continue to be involved in the event, and moving forward, we suggested finding ways to encourage and incentivize staff participation from across Libraries departments, continued funding for library-branded technology giveaways, and working with Learning Technologies to refine the passport activity to improve the student experience.

## **Leveraging the Findings**

The outreach assessment process has resulted in a large amount of rich assessment data and staff experiences on which to base future outreach programming and partnership development. In reflecting on the first year of implementing the toolkit and using multiple assessment methods, we found that taking a mixed-methods approach to assessment was key, and for our particular events, the methods of ethnographic observation with photo documentation and staff reflection were the most effective. The outreach assessment framework has facilitated easier planning and execution of recurring outreach events and supported our partnerships across campus. The toolkit documents and process resulted in reporting clear and actionable recommendations, provided transparency in requesting resources and funding from all stakeholders involved, and developed common ground in collaborating and communicating with our partners. The outreach reports for each program received favorable responses from UW partners and Libraries colleagues. The Director of UW First Year Programs commented on the reports, “this information is invaluable. I love the suggestions... and I appreciate that you piloted new events and suggest recommendations for elimination.”<sup>11</sup> A Libraries colleague involved in one of our events emailed the team noting, “This is an impressive report.”<sup>12</sup> In addition to opening new lines of communication with partners, the framework has resulted in shared assessment goals for future programming. For example, the USS and URP teams are now planning joint assessment of our combined programming (the Undergraduate Research for Community College Transfer Students

Panel Presentation and the Transfer Student Social) for Dawg Daze 2017 and are also investigating additional programming across the undergraduate student experience.

As a result of the pilot, assessment is now integrated into all undergraduate outreach programming and events planned by our team. Moving forward, we will apply this framework to a variety of other outreach activities, including instructional outreach to underrepresented student groups and engagement projects such as social media communications. A major outcome of this pilot has been the changing perceptions of outreach assessment within our local context. To support this culture change, the toolkit has been released to other UW Libraries' teams for use on outreach programming for a variety of audiences. We have received positive feedback, especially regarding the adaptability of the toolkit to specific team and programming needs. Areas for development include prioritizing working on and applying the partnership review section of the framework and finalizing all documents and resources for the full-scale release of the outreach assessment toolkit to colleagues across the UW Libraries and to the profession.

## Reflection

There are several considerations and best practices in applying this framework and using the toolkit. We found that setting clear goals for each outreach activity in the planning stage is essential for choosing appropriate assessment methods. Having explicit goals and designing them around a specific audience for each event gave our team something to continually refer back to and revisit throughout planning, executing, and communicating the results of the event. The toolkit was intentionally designed as a detailed guide for conducting assessment. Therefore, many of the assessment methods require very little training for students and staff to take on. Do not shy away from inviting coworkers or student employees to help with assessing outreach activities. For example, for the Dawg Daze events, all of the ethnographic observation was done by graduate student employees with little to no background or knowledge of this assessment method.

One of the most rewarding outcomes of the 2016–17 pilot was the focus on partnership development. Through the planning and assessment processes, we developed common goals and language to highlight the value of each partner's work on the events. Planning the next cycle of events with our partners was simplified, and our conversations were more fruitful due to the communication of assessment results facilitated by the outreach reports. Our conversations started at a deeper place and went beyond surface event details; they focused on goals, outcomes, and how better to engage the student experience.

While the assessment framework has proven very beneficial to our team and local context, there are challenges and constraints in applying the framework to outreach activities. Considering staff labor is essential when embarking on any kind of assessment work. Developing and implementing our new assessment process for the first time was, as to be expected, time-intensive. The process was further constrained

by the academic quarter system. For example, the quick turnaround of executing programming in winter quarter, while simultaneously analyzing fall quarter assessment data and communicating the findings, was challenging. It was also a challenge to both plan and implement new programming for new student audiences and get partner and librarian buy-in while simultaneously building a new assessment program. While we had staff reflection built into the assessment framework and toolkit, the reality is that ongoing and true reflection does take time. We are still in the midst of thinking through what a year-long assessment and programming cycle looks like for our team.

Many of our Dawg Daze events are annual or recurring events. As such, we are always looking to improve outcomes and the student experience and fine-tune the planning and execution of the events. We found that in terms of creating assessment reports, distinguishing between the planning and assessment details was difficult. When we were heavily involved in the planning and execution of the event, we struggled to focus only on the overall event outcomes and assessment data at hand and not focus on our own anecdotal evidence or experiences in relation to event execution. One of our team members found the report that was the easiest to write was for the event in which she had no involvement at all. Relying solely on the assessment evidence made it easier to draw conclusions and make recommendations for event improvement.

Considering the best practices and challenges of the outreach assessment framework and toolkit leads us to offer some advice to others interested in doing similar work. Outreach assessment in academic libraries does not have the history of formal assessment that we see with collections, library space use, or information literacy instruction. This mixed-methods approach to outreach assessment requires support and buy-in from stakeholders and colleagues. In order to get buy-in, our team continuously centered the value that this assessment framework provides our institution and stakeholders and found allies and advocates through partners that were already doing great assessment work and understood its potential in demonstrating value.

Our goal of creating an outreach assessment framework flexible enough to be applied to any type of partnership or outreach activity was met during the 2016–17 pilot. The framework is applicable to any institution type or library size, and any team using the toolkit is able to adapt, re-mix, streamline, or expand the documents to fit their individual needs. Being mindful of the staff labor needed to plan, execute, and assess programs or partnerships is especially important for smaller teams or teams with limited resources.

Reflecting on the Undergraduate Student Success team's assessment framework for undergraduate student outreach, we have found the process overall to be transformative in terms of our ability to clearly articulate library outreach goals and demonstrate through evidence whether we met these goals. The framework has also demonstrated to key university partners the value and impact of the Libraries on the undergraduate student experience.

## Notes

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12. Elliott Stevens, email message to author, March 10, 2017.

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